RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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Housing Affordability and the Well-being of Children: Toward a Longitudinal Research Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this study was to develop and pilot a longitudinal research strategy that could be used to explore how affordable housing impacts children's development and well-being. Additional objectives of this study were to explore the following:

1. If there are differences between private rental housing, social housing and the current Affordable Housing Program in Ontario in regard to their impacts on the well-being of children and families.
2. The perceptions of parents and youth on how the receipt of affordable housing might mediate other outcomes, such as employment, education and health, using qualitative methods.
3. The impact of long waiting lists for subsidized housing on children's well-being using qualitative interviews.

METHODOLOGY

A longitudinal research strategy was developed and tested through a multi-city study in southern Ontario that allowed for testing of the developed questionnaires. The primary data collection strategy was a *three-wave longitudinal study* conducted on the same group of participants over a period of eight months. A baseline survey was completed with 65 adults (including 22 parents of children aged 6-15 years) and 13 youth (aged 16-21 years) who either were on the social housing waiting list, and therefore in private rental housing, or had recently moved into a social housing unit or an Affordable Housing Program (AHP) subsidized unit.

The baseline survey questionnaires for children and youth comprised an amalgamation of questions drawn from several scales used in previous studies. The questions included a variety of dimensions associated with child well-being, such as indicators related to children's feelings toward themselves and their lives; relationships with peers/friends; relationships with parents; education/experiences at school; physical and socio-emotional health; activities in which they participate; and the level of deprivation experienced by their family.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were also conducted with a small cohort of parent and youth participants to explore how the receipt of affordable housing might mediate other outcomes, such as employment, education and health. These participants as well as their children were invited to submit drawings and pictures of their previous and present homes. Examples of these drawings are included in the final report. Finally, participants who were on the waiting list for subsidized housing described their experiences waiting for affordable housing.

KEY FINDINGS

Analyses of findings from the pilot data indicate that there are likely relationships between various indicators of children's well-being and parents' receipt of subsidized housing that could be uncovered through a longitudinal research project over a sufficient period of time. Children and youth living in unaffordable homes that were not subsidized may experience more negative outcomes than those living in subsidized housing.

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- Housing affordability was an issue even when families were in subsidized housing. Preliminary findings show that 36 per cent of participants in both subsidized and non-subsidized housing spent 50 per cent or more of their income on housing costs. Eleven per cent of participant households in AHP housing were paying more than 80 per cent of their monthly income on housing costs, compared to approximately 6 per cent of participants in social housing and 15 per cent in private rental housing. Fifty per cent of participants living in AHP units reported spending more than 50 per cent of their household income on housing.
- Qualitative findings contextualized the personal experiences of participants that led to their need for subsidized housing within larger structural processes, illuminated the strategies that they use to cope with the difficulties of a long wait for subsidized housing and provided insights into the impact that this extended wait has on the well-being of families and their children.
- Moving into affordable/social housing had a positive impact on participants' quality of life in many ways. In addition to reducing financial stress, participants also talked about how getting into affordable housing was good for their health. Participants noted that they felt safer or more secure in their current housing, compared to where they lived before.
- Participants expressed a sense of powerlessness while on the waiting list. Participants spoke of feeling unable to move forward in life and the frustration that accompanies waiting for updates on their status.
  - Families on the waiting list reported experiencing financial stress.
  - Participants' stories indicate that some of these children and youth whose parents are on the waiting list may be at risk of underachieving educationally.
  - Participants' stories were threaded with strategies that they used to cope with the difficulties of a long wait. Their survival strategies included formal and informal supports.
- One of the key methodological lessons from the pilot was that developing and conducting a longitudinal research study must allow for a long time frame, as many households remain on the waiting list for a long time. Participants on the waiting list were still there by the third wave interviews.
- To fully implement a longitudinal study on the impact of affordable housing on children's well-being, a study period of at least five years is recommended. Recruitment and sampling can be done over a one-year period. Also, the length of time between waves needs to be at least one year for there to be changes that are worth observing. Such a time frame will show how moving into affordable housing affects households. For example, it will allow for an examination of how different elements of the household budget, such as funds available for food and recreation, are affected by subsidized housing.

CONCLUSION

Analyses of findings from the pilot data indicate that there are likely relationships between various indicators of children's well-being and parents' receipt of subsidized housing that could be uncovered through a longitudinal research project over a sufficiently long period of time. One of the key methodological lessons from the pilot was that such a study should allow for a time frame of at least five years, with recruitment and sampling conducted over a one-year period.

CMHC Project Manager: Elizabeth Dandy

Research Consultant: Uzo Anucha, Helen Leung, Alexander Lovell, The Applied Social Welfare Research and Evaluation Group, York University

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or contact:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
700 Montreal Road
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P7

Phone: 1-800-668-2642
Fax: 1-800-245-9274

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